Prosthetic and palimpsestic play in Agnès Desarthe's Le remplaçant (2009)

Prosthetic and Palimpsestic Play in Agnès Desarthe's *Le Remplaçant* (2009): Revisiting the Holocaust

Susan Bainbrigge

French Forum, Volume 44, Number 1, Spring 2019, pp. 87-101 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/frf.2019.0006

Prosthetic and Palimpsestic Play in Agnès Desarthe's *Le Remplaçant* (2009): Revisiting the Holocaust

SUSAN BAINBRIGGE

> Chaque famille juive possède son conteur légendaire, et chacun pense que le sien est meilleur que les autres.
> *Le Remplaçant*, p. 7

> Home is where we start from.
> D. W. Winnicott

Agnès Desarthe's *Le Remplaçant* opens with the above pronouncement on storytelling traditions within Jewish culture, and the special place accorded to the storyteller. Desarthe's own credentials as a lover of stories is already well established. She is a prolific writer of books for adults and children (especially the latter where she has published over 30 books), and a translator (into French, of Loïs Lowry, Anne Fine, Cynthia Ozick, Jay McInerney and Virginia Woolf). Her ten novels have won several literary prizes: the Prix du Livre Inter (1996) for *Un secret sans importance;* the Prix Marcel Pagnol et Virgin/version Fémina for *Le Remplaçant* (2009); and the Prix Renaudot des Lycéens for *Dans la nuit brune* (2010).[1]

In *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, Shirley Jordan devotes a chapter to Desarthe, highlighting the ambiguities in the author's experience of identity, and tracing the "ethical motivation in much of her storytelling" (186). She writes that her work "springs from an imagination and a cultural identity which are marked [. . .] by hybridity: born in France but with Eastern European Jewish roots on her mother's side and a North African Jewish heritage from her father" (185). There is "detailed attention to family, community and gender relations" (185), to ageing and loss, to transmission, and finally, to the history of the Holocaust (185). These characteristics, as identified by Jordan, are all pertinent to *Le Remplacant* and to my reading of this text here.

The theme of replacement is at the heart of Desarthe's 2009 narrative, *Le Remplaçant*. It paints a portrait of Desarthe's beloved "papi," who is not in fact a blood relation, but the man who married her bereaved grandmother after the Second World War. A parallel portrait emerges of the eminent Polish Jewish educator and physician, Janusz Korczak (pen name of Henryk Goldszmit, 1878–1942), whose experiences of the Warsaw ghetto (where he looked after orphaned children), provided the impetus for Desarthe's project.[2]

In this analysis, I trace the author-narrator's journey, via the defining moment of her visit to the Ghetto Fighter's House Museum in Israel, described as the catalyst for the book, to the finding of her own third-generation voice (and place).[3] Within an analysis of the stories and memories in *Le Remplaçant*, and a consideration of the aesthetics of her storytelling, I investigate the pertinence of theories addressing the writing of third-generation narratives of the Shoah. In particular, I consider Marianne Hirsch's use of "postmemory," Alison Landsberg's thesis on "prosthetic memory," and various perspectives on the nature of "hauntology." I aim to navigate the complex dynamics of *Le Remplaçant* to find, via the prosthesis and the palimpsest, a story in which absent figures play a symbolic role, and in which the author-narrator explores the replacement of one story by another: "On veut écrire un livre et c'est un autre qui vient" (68). The palimpsestic process, indicated explicitly in this quotation, lends itself to analyses of transgenerational experience in its emphasis on overlapping traces and links, on conscious and unconscious processes, on the particular and the universal. Max Silverman's landmark study, *Palimpsestic Memory* (2013), presents a politics of palimpsestic memory which functions "according to a complex process of interconnection, interaction, substitution and displacement of memory traces in which the particular and the universal, and memory and history, are inextricably held in an anxious relationship" (28). Historical events, lived experience, and their imaginative reconstruction via the writing act will be at the heart of this analysis, where those anxious and ambivalent relationships, between reality and imagination, as highlighted by Silverman, can be explored.

Desarthe, a French author born into a family directly affected by the Shoah, is not alone in returning repeatedly to this experience. Viart and Vercier, in their study of French literature, remind us of the preponderance of works which revisit the two World Wars (162). They analyze an extensive range of publications which document, in their words, "ces blessures que les deux guerres mondiales ont laissées dans le corps social et chez les

individus" (171).[4] Recent works by Chantal Chawaf, Philippe Grimbert, Denis Lachaud, Jonathan Littell, and Lydie Salvayre are cited and positioned in a literary landscape that acknowledges their trailblazing predecessors, Marguerite Duras, Patrick Modiano, and Claude Simon, for example (162–71). Viart and Vercier's study thus confirms the existence and perpetuation of an important seam of creative output in French, and indicates a transgenerational legacy in Holocaust literature, and in which Desarthe's writings may also be considered. It is to the question of transmission, and Desarthe's engagement with ideas of transgenerational transmission that we now turn.

Marianne Hirsch and Gabriele Schwab's studies on transgenerational transmission are well known (see Hirsch 2008; Schwab 2010). In particular "transgenerational transmission of trauma" is understood to refer to a trauma that passes down the generations, and which is used in the context of Holocaust survivors. Hirsch examines trauma specifically in the context of the passing down of traumatic experiences to subsequent generations. Her use of the term "postmemory" highlights the unconscious and projective aspects of this transmission, which are particularly salient features for the purposes of this analysis (106–7). Hirsch's definition includes all kinds of experiences and relationships, such as objects, images and stories, as well as behaviors and affects passed on within a family and more broadly within the culture.[5] Schwab highlights subsequently that "[i]t is through the unconscious transmission of disavowed familial dynamics that one generation affects another generation's unconscious" (4). In an interview with Tim Martin about her novel, *Dans la nuit brune* (2010), Desarthe describes her experience of the transmission of grief, which resonates with the process described by Hirsch and Schwab. Desarthe comments on an experience of "carrying" grief, which she recognized to be with her, but belonging to her mother, in other words, a type of "postmemory":

> There was a father and a daughter, I was thinking about other people's grief—then I thought, oh. It's because your own grandfather was killed in Auschwitz, so you have in yourself the grief of someone else. I'll always carry my mother's grief: it isn't mine, but it is with me. It was like a chain. (2012)

Experiences of loss, and the transgenerational "chain" linking the author-narrator to her predecessors, also appear in *Le Remplaçant*. Instances of identification with those whose lives were affected by the Holocaust first-hand are noted. This is prompted by a memory of her six-year-old self

watching the demolition of older houses to make way for new ones in the 13th *arrondissement*. In the remains, she notices the torn wallpapers, with layer upon layer of different designs.[6] The sight prompts a meditation on the passing of time, and on the transitory nature of things. The author-narrator's awareness of her relative wealth, in a comfortable and relatively secure France of the 1970s, is compared with earlier, more traumatic times (39). More specifically, she describes putting herself in her mother's shoes, when the mother, as a child, fled wartime Paris:

> Au milieu de mon champ de ruines, je me prenais pour ma mère, qui, à mon âge, avait fui Paris sous les bombes et qui, à son retour, avait trouvé sa ville noire et triste. Je me changeais en fillette berlinoise, en enfant de Varsovie. Je me réincarnais. Je sentais retentir en moi l'écho d'une destruction passée plus meurtrière [. . .] (39–40)

The echoes of earlier traumas are felt through a vicarious imagining of her mother's experiences as a young girl. They become part of the imaginative fabric of her own layered "ruins" ("mon champ de ruines").

A further transgenerational reference concerns deportation and separation. The author-narrator describes her experience of both distance and proximity to the war which had such a devastating effect on earlier generations. She describes another process of identification with those children carried away to the concentration camps:

> Je pensais à la déportation, très souvent. J'avais les larmes aux yeux quand je songeais aux enfants séparés de leurs parents. Je m'infligeais de subtiles tortures à base d'identification: j'étais l'enfant qui monte dans le wagon plombé et voyage le nez écrasé contre le giron d'inconnus [. . .] (77)

She refers to the pain inflicted in the vicarious identification process ("de subtiles tortures"), imagining the suffocating horrors of the traumatized child. These kinds of identifications are not unproblematic, as Trauma Studies commentators, such as Richard Crownshaw, Debarati Sanyal, and Max Silverman, have debated (2010, 2013, 2015). To what extent can third-generation writers imagine a trauma—by proxy? To what extent is the use of testimony and story problematic? Crownshaw emphasizes the power of transferential dynamics in understanding ourselves, and the lives of others, whilst teasing out what belongs to whom. These difficulties are explored in *Le Remplaçant*.[7] Silverman steers a nuanced line through the debates on memory, testimony and "postmemory." In *Palimpsestic Memory*, he

proposes a "cosmopolitical" approach which allows the palimpsest to hold in a non-binary dynamic the relationship of testimony to cultural memory (173–81). He acknowledges the risks of reductive positionings emerging via the saturation, normalization or commodification in contemporary culture of images of violence and suffering. Sensitive to these dynamics, he highlights how the creation of a space to study *ambivalent* connections between the particular and the universal via palimpsestic memory might allow for a "new, ethical site of memory" (179).

I would argue that, through the use of the palimpsest, suggested by the image of the wallpapers, and the prosthesis, by way of key cultural experiences pertaining to Holocaust memorialisation, the author-narrator presents the emergence of a creative storytelling self via her researching (of her family history, and of a more general collective history). She finds her own voice in a re-placement of self within these various histories, in new and unexpected ways that do not necessarily elide or collapse difference. This perspective supports psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas' understanding of the importance of words for naming the "unthought known": the latter relates to those preverbal experiences which feel uncannily familiar, which might unconsciously shape our behavior, but which we have not yet fully grasped (1987). *Le Remplaçant* highlights the power of such unconscious transmissions, hauntings, and retellings, in a revisiting of Holocaust testimony via stories, family, palimpsest and prosthesis.

A Haunted Text

Haunted by an ancestor both known and unknown, the author-narrator questions the basis for familial ties, and the nature of origins. The confusion regarding her 'replacement' grandfather's identity challenges the notion of blood links and inheritance through the examples of multiple names (11–12) and his diverse Eastern European origins.[8] This is the same grandfather to whom the author dedicated her earlier novel, *Un secret sans importance* (1996), reinforcing the importance this 'replacement' figure holds for her creative inspiration.[9]

In *Le Remplaçant* the grandfather is central to the book. The publicity blurb on the back cover includes an extract taken from the book, which reads as follows:

> Peut-être ferais-je mieux de commencer par expliquer que mon grand-père n'est pas mon grand-père. [. . .] Bouz, Boris, Baruch n'est

> pas le père de ma mère. Le père de ma mère a été tué à Auschwitz en 1942. B.B.B.—appelons-le ainsi, pour faire plus court—est l'homme avec qui ma grand-mère, la vraie, a refait sa vie . . . si l'on peut dire.
>
> [. . .] En confrontant son image avec celle du pédagogue polonais Janusz Korczak, directeur de l'orphelinat du ghetto de Varsovie, Agnès Desarthe trace le portrait de son anti-héros favori. (11–12)

These two men provide the starting point for her story. In the author-narrator's family history "papi" replaces the maternal grandfather who died, although this is nuanced by the comment that his less illustrious background automatically precludes any overshadowing of the "original." "Papi" also comes to occupy a prominent place alongside Korczak in the narrative. Both represent replacement father figures within their own histories. Korczak's life intertwines with that of "papi" (and his death, in Treblinka, alongside the many orphaned children under his care, also mirrors "papi's" predecessor, the author-narrator's biological grandfather).

Desarthe describes the process by which her project on the famous Korczak was derailed by others, living and dead. The project she had consciously set out to pursue becomes 'replaced' by the one that actually took shape with its various fantasies, ghosts, and unpredictable twists and turns. This openness to haunting is mentioned explicitly: the author-narrator confirms her belief that the dead have a significant hold over the living:

> Qu'ils soient des revenants, des fantômes, des dibbuks,[10] des apparitions, qu'ils hantent les consciences, les cuisines, les chambres à coucher, les cimetières, les collines ou les boules de cristal, les morts participent à l'histoire, dialoguent avec les vivants [. . .] (58)

Moreover, the notion of the haunted text is, of course, not a new one—it has a long, haunted, history itself.[11] The legacy of "hauntology" includes studies by Derrida, who coined the term within the framework of deconstruction in *Spectres of Marx* (1993); and Freud, in "Moses and Monotheism", who wrote on the inevitable "hauntings" of previous generations, with the repetition compulsion a central concept.[12] Colin Davis writes of the importance of hauntology as "part of an endeavour to keep raising the stakes of literary study, to make it a place where we can interrogate our relation to the dead, examine the elusive identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between the thought and the unthought" (Davis 379). His comments echo Christopher Bollas, on the (as yet) unknown

(unknowable?) aspects of our experience. They also highlight those liminal spaces, at the boundaries between the living and the dead. For the author-narrator in *Le Remplaçant* the dead are indeed shown to haunt the lives of the living.

Holocaust writing: "On veut écrire un livre et c'est un autre qui vient" (68)

How does the ghost of Korczak, for whom "papi" will become "le remplaçant," catalyze the initial project? He also has "replacement" father-figure credentials: neither is the biological parent or grandparent of the children they look after, a feature in common that the author-narrator interprets as their commitment and selfless "dévouement" (69). The author-narrator writes that a visit to the Ghetto Fighter's House Museum in Israel prompted her to write about Korczak; she describes feeling an immediate and uncanny connection with him, despite never having met him:

> Je me suis assise par terre et j'ai pensé que je pourrais rester là des heures, que *c'était ma place*. [. . .] *J'avais l'impression de le connaître*, je me sentais comme au jour de retrouvailles. [. . .]. Korczak était mort en 1942, je ne l'avais jamais connu, il n'était pas de ma famille.
>
> À la fin de la visite, pour me *consoler* de ne rien pouvoir saisir de cette histoire, et me pardonner d'avance de ne rien en retenir, *je me suis promis d'écrire un livre sur lui*. (65, my emphasis)

The author-narrator describes a felt sense of familiarity, in which the writing starts to take shape. In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), Alison Landsberg writes of pivotal moments "at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past," which offer the potential for social transformation. She specifically refers to experiences in museums, describing these moments as potentially transformative:

> In the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics. (2)

Landsberg argues that these are powerful new forms of memory, suggesting that such prosthetic memories "might serve as the grounds for unexpected

alliances across chasms of difference" (3). Unexpected alliances emerge for the author-narrator of *Le Remplaçant*, between, for example Korczak, herself and "papi." She is aware of the role of unconscious processes in these transformative moments. She writes about how the planned project on Korczak is further transformed by the creative process of the writing itself, with its *lapsus*:

> *Le problème, avec les livres, c'est qu'ils n'obéissent pas à leur auteur.* On choisit un héros et voilà qu'un personnage secondaire brigue le premier plan, on construit une histoire mais une demi-page d'écriture s'empresse de la déconstruire. (64–65, my emphasis)

> [. . .] Ce livre, celui que je suis en train d'écrire, était censé être un portrait du pédagogue polonais, mais dès les premières pages, *le lapsus a œuvré.*(65, my emphasis)

In this further palimpsestic layering, "papi" does not replace Korczak in any formal structured way. The overlapping features of the portraits can be traced within the narrative flow, meandering through the details of real and imagined lives. Desarthe's immersion in the life of Korczak engages a personal process in which complementary intertextual recollections are juxtaposed with childhood recollections. These intertexts include, for example, Korczak's writings, the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer, and references connecting her to the city and culture of Czernowitz. Increasingly through her creative re-placements within this network of palimpsests and prosthetic experiences, she identifies less as the dispossessed child (the victim amidst the ruins of others' lives), and more as the agent of her own story. This metatextual authoring process engages specifically with the difficulties of writing about the past.

Histories, Stories, Objects and Ethics

Throughout the text the author-narrator emphasizes doubt in her capacity to remember "facts" and dates: she has more faith in her intuition and dreams (24). Indeed, supposed certainties are shown to be subject to processes of fabulation, the narrative consistently challenging any fact-fiction binary opposition. What emerges is a nuanced depiction of the ways in which inner and outer worlds connect and shape each other. It is in this context that she demonstrates the vital role of literature and the arts to the communication of the truths of human experience, including the traumatic events of the Holocaust.

In order to research her family history, the author-narrator prefers to read the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer than to ask her mother for factual information (58).[13] She argues that Singer's stories, the likes of *La Famille Moskat* or *Le Certificat*, offer an imaginative proximity with her ancestors' lives more than any historical document could (58). Here we find again the imaginative potential of fiction for re-membrance. Singer drew on childhood experiences in the Jewish quarters of Warsaw, using demons and ghosts in stories of everyday life, past and present. His treatment of the dead alongside the living, for her akin to a "cohabitation," becomes a creative cohabitation of sorts for her, between fiction and family genealogy.

This interlinking of personal and collective history can be traced through further intertextual references. The case of Czernowitz brings a spatial dimension, as did the aforementioned museum visit.[14] A literary supplement from *Le Monde* serves a prosthetic function. The author-narrator could not bring herself to read the supplement she had been carrying in her bag. It contained a review of a collection of poetry from Czernowitz, whose title "Chants d'un monde massacré" refers to the lost city (52). The city vanished after World War II, renamed Chernivtsi, and part of modern-day Ukraine. It lay at the heart of Jewish-German Eastern European culture until its "shattering and dispersal" in the wake of the war (Hirsch and Spitzer, Preface). We learn that Czernowitz, or thereabouts, is where "papi" was born, although this and many other facts of his life remain unclear (52). The city, like "papi," symbolizes multilingual and multicultural perspectives and identities. The idea of the city would remain in the psyche, transmitted through cultural memory—including traumatic memories of anti-Semitic practices, internment, and loss. A reticence on the part of the author-narrator to find out more, a fear of what the process of reading might entail, reveals a further resistance to "knowing." "Not knowing" avoids the confrontation with loss: "ne rien savoir, c'est ne rien perdre" (53). The author-narrator is aware of a self-protective dynamic at work within her writing practice, in the face of confrontations with the past, in this case via the voices of the pre-war Czernowitz poets. The horror of what would come to pass there is captured by the short phrase: "Ils ne savent pas ce qui les attend" (53). The link between "papi" and Czernowitz is another example of a personal family history becoming intertwined in a greater historical event. Hirsch and Spitzer argue that Czernowitz functions as an "organizer" for individual and collective experiences. They refer to the "haunting continuity" of the city as "place and idea for generations of Jews who survived its political demise" (Preface). This is perhaps what

the author-narrator senses and fears. In the act of carrying the newspaper, she holds onto the potential source of information while fearing its contents—afraid of what she might become haunted by (as, so she suspects, her mother is [52]). The vignette emphasizes the conflict between remembering and forgetting: the newspaper is an item she cannot bear to let go, or to read. The (prosthetic) power of the poems, the image (the photo), and the object (the newspaper), is inscribed into her story of connecting with the pain of this collective past, and we are reminded of the crucial role of fiction, and of poetry, in remembrance.

In a similar fashion, a recipe is used to highlight the vagaries of memory and the power of unconscious processes (66–68). The recipe is for a type of shortbread, "les pletz" made by her grandmother (67). She recounts having later found the recipe in a Jewish cookery book, but subsequently being unable to locate it when returning to the same book. Speaking of this experience during a radio broadcast, she recounts how a listener sent her the recipe, which she then misplaced again. Such an anecdote speaks to the themes of remembering and forgetting, and to familial and cultural connections and transmissions. This example foregrounds the subsequent portrayal of the book project itself, the way in which the book she writes emerges partly unbeknownst to her, "à mon insu" (68). The mysteries inherent in the creative process, the unearthing of the unexpected, the losing track of the original lines of enquiry, and so on, are given a significance in the connections made with Desarthe's own familial history (68).

There are also references to family heirlooms, which likewise connect with the exploration of a collective Jewish legacy. The author-narrator refers to a small engraved plate which her mother's father had managed to have smuggled out of Drancy for his daughter's 5th birthday, prior to his death in Auschwitz. She writes that they can hardly bear to look at it (84–85). In these details, the newspaper that cannot be read, the plate that is unbearable to hold, the poignancy of traumatic historical events is evoked. The author-narrator writes explicitly about her narrative practice as one which focuses on the personal and everyday details within a context of the collective experience of war: "Quand je pense à la guerre—et cela, depuis que je suis toute petite—je me demande de quoi est fait le quotidien dans les temps de conflit" (76). In researching and writing about her grandfather, and Korczak, she interweaves these childhood memories, examining the ways in which the stories belonging to her family also belong to a broader history.

The author-narrator returns to impressions that history has made on

her, via the document, the object, the museum visit, and through imaginative means. She raises the ethical question of how best to educate subsequent generations about the Holocaust: whether it is possible, or advisable, even to try to imagine living "in someone else's shoes." Such an experience risks a collapsing of difference, of generation, of lived experience, within an ignorance of context—via stories and fiction, or by other kinds of "prosthetic" experiences, the museum or monument, for example (20). On an exchange with the Director of the Ghetto fighters' museum about how to convey the reality of the ghetto, the author-narrator contemplates the challenges implicit in the attempt to understand the lives of others. There are risks involved in creating any kind of potentially identificatory experience, but she argues that there is an ethical imperative to make the attempt: "Nous sommes pratiquement incapables de comprendre ce dont nous n'avons pas, personnellement, fait l'expérience et c'est, selon moi, ce handicap qui constitue l'une des sources les plus certaines de la barbarie" (20).

The uncanny encounter with Korczak's legacy at this museum is the catalyst for the book. The author-narrator summarizes his contributions to child welfare (69–84), including ideas which informed the United Nations' "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (1959). His pioneering views emphasized the basic right of the child to expression, to an education, and to a unique sense of identity (75). The educator's decision not to have children himself (related to his formative experiences of his father's mental illness), is used to interlink the transgenerational dynamics at play (69–70).

In terms of the palimpsestic process, the inclusion of references from his *Journal du Ghetto* (1978) plays an important role. His belief in the power of stories, theater, song, even in the face of the most extreme hardship, is shown to resonate with Desarthe's understanding of consolation and of what makes us human (and potentially more humane) (65, 69). She writes that: "On raconte des histoires et on chante parce que, même parqués comme des bestiaux, et jusqu'au seuil de l'abattoir, on demeure des humains" (83). Here she engages explicitly with the place of creativity amidst the worst excesses of human behavior as evidenced by the Shoah (84), described as a potentially ineffectual but necessary "résistance."[15]

The author-narrator observes that Korczak's views on human rights are exemplified by the shape and form of the diary itself: with inclusion of the children's words and explanations of the rationale behind children's parliaments established within the orphanages (71–72). Her emphasis on Korczak's respect for difference and individuality resonates with a broader ethical perspective, an acknowledgement of the importance of separating

out differences of perspective, and of generation, with acceptance of the challenge for anyone to hear, to imagine and ultimately to respect the position of the other. The functions of the listening act, and of the right to tell one's own story, come to the fore, as they had in the portrait of "papi." The psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub argues for the importance of a survivor of trauma to be able to tell their story, and the necessity for their experience to be heard by a listener, by the Other as other (1992). In a similar vein, the inclusion of Korczak and the grandfather's portraits emphasize in Desarthe's text both speaking and listening as potentially reparatory ethical acts, as conveyed by the numerous connections to a particular testimonial context.

Korczak's humanitarian legacy reconnects with a personal story in the concluding pages of Desarthe's text. His emphasis on listening to the other, and on the other's right to be heard, finds expression via a family memory. The author-narrator describes a visit she makes, whilst the book project is progressing, with her five-month old son to her elderly grandfather's apartment, a few kilometers away in a tower block in the 13th arrondissement in Paris.[16] It offers a moment in which Korczak's insistence on the importance of the child's right to be heard is played out in this everyday scene. "Papi" implicitly accepts the infant's existence as an individual capable of communicating, albeit pre-verbally. Their exchange of utterances, and shared vulnerability, both dependent on their carers, the old man himself struggling to speak, his gestures slow, is depicted in a way that suggests the common ground that can be found for understanding. Such portraits of everyday interactions acquire a richer symbolic significance when read in the light of the intertextual dynamics of the book.

To conclude, transgenerational experiences, via the palimpsest and the prosthesis, can be viewed through a range of spatial and temporal frames. The legacies of both Korczak and "papi" are shown to connect with both personal and more universal concerns. *Le Remplaçant* depicts the messiness of everyday reality, in which Desarthe's grandfather, with his "antihero" struggles and foibles, inspires by his survival of the war, illness, depression, and ultimately, by having been able to "oser aimer vivre" (60). The portrait of the pioneering doctor Korczak co-exists alongside this more ordinary account. Via both portraits, via fact, fantasy and fiction, the author-narrator explores what it means to be human (and she hopes, humane). There are, potentially, other transgenerational echoes and hauntings. For example, the author's father, the pediatrician and writer, Aldo Naouri, is absent from the text, although he would seem to have

much in common with the figure of Korczak (their profession, their interests in child welfare).[17] If Naouri is present by his absence, it is "papi," the "conteur légendaire," whose life is foregrounded within the author-narrator's stories. Also haunting the stories, perhaps, is the British paediatrician, Donald W. Winnicott. He appears in Desarthe's first novel, *Quelques minutes de bonheur absolu* (1993), by way of an epigraph which reads: "Se cacher est un plaisir, mais ne pas être trouvé est une catastrophe" ("It is a joy to be hidden, but a disaster not to be found") (1971).[18] Another parallel (haunting) pairing then potentially emerges, within this repeated trope of objects lost and found. Both Naouri and Winnicott are present by their absence in this playful and moving hide-and-seek narrative, in which the author-narrator states: "tout doive se faire à mon insu" (68). The writing project could then be understood in terms of a process of re-placements, in which what has been lost, dead, or otherwise "unthought" comes to life via memories, stories, others, objects and documents. She presents the emergence of a creative storytelling self via her researching, and the articulation of her own voice in a re-placement of self within these histories and stories, in different and unexpected ways. Finally, the text itself offers up a world in which figures obscured, lost, found, and reconfigured emerge via palimpsest and prosthesis, through this examination of the possibilities offered by imaginative means to connect with personal familial, and shared histories.

University of Edinburgh

Notes

1. Some of her books have been translated into English by Flamingo and Portobello books.

2. This was originally for the "Figures libres" series with the Éditions de l'Olivier.

3. See museum website: http://www.gfh.org.il/Eng/ [accessed 15 January 2018].

4. For studies investigating the presence of the Second World War in writings in French, see Atack et al (2012), Barclay (2011), Blanckeman et al (2004), Dambre et al (2013), Davis (2007) and Silverman (2013).

5. Hirsch states that "[p]ostmemory is not identical to memory: it is "post," but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force" (109).

6. We can compare this with a similar image and dynamic in Modiano's *Livret de famille* (1977), with thanks to the reviewer for this connection (167).

7. Debarati Sanyal (2015) explores the tensions between testimonial specificity and the imagining of it, or writing about it. Her positioning of "proximity" makes explicit the perspectives of self and other, warning of the dangers of "traumatic complicity."

8. "Mais de quel pays tu viens?" lui demandais-je. "Il me répondait avec patience et précision, mais j'étais, et suis encore, incapable de reproduire ses explications. Il y avait trop de données, trop de noms: Russie, Moldavie, Roumanie, Bessarabie, Ukraine" (28). See also the references to history being confusing, contradictory, and uncertain (53).

9. For an analysis of haunting in this text, see France Grenaudier Klijn (2007). "Post-memorial ghosts and shadows in Agnès Desarthe's *Un Secret sans importance*." *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*. 28(2): 49–62.

10. "Dibbuk" (Jewish folklore) is a malevolent wandering spirit that enters and possesses the body of a living person.

11. See Margaret-Anne Hutton's reading of Sylvie Germain's 2005 Holocaust novel *Magnus* (2009), and Philippe Grimbert's *Un secret*.

12. For a clinical perspective, see Freiberg, Adelson and Shapiro, "Ghosts in the Nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships," *Journal of American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 14 (3) (1975): 387–421.

13. He is credited with having taught her to read and to write about her family. These early influences are mentioned in *Comment j'ai appris à lire* (2013), in "Quelle lectrice êtes-vous, Agnès Desarthe?" Interview with Pascale Frey, Website *Onlalu: Site de critiques et d'informations littéraires*. http://www.onlalu.com/2013/09/25/quelle-lectrice-etes-vous-agnes-desarthe-3533 [accessed 15 January 2018].

14. Czernowitz interlinks with the study by Hirsch, co-authored with Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home* (2010), in which they grapple with familial legacies across generations.

15. Silverman argues that "artistic works may be more suited than historical or sociological method to making visible the complex interaction of times and sites at play in memory" (28–29).

16. Two references to visits to the grandfather's apartment bookend the narrative through a structuring device, in which the temporal frame—of a present time of writing—is maintained and holds the palimpsestic and prosthetic narratives within (21, 85).

17. For further information see the website: http://www.aldonaouri.com/bio.htm [accessed 18 January 2018].

18. Desarthe was interviewed for a Winnicott documentary by France Culture: "Une vie, une œuvre," series by Martin Quenehen, 13 December 2014. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/une-vie-une-oeuvre/donald-w-winnicott [website accessed 1 August 2017].

Works Cited

Atack, Margaret, and Chris Lloyd, editors. *Framing Narratives of the Second World War and Occupation in France: New Readings*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012.

Barclay, Fiona. *Writing Postcolonial France: Hauntings, Literature and the Maghreb.* Lexington: Lexington Books, 2011.

Blanckeman, Bruno, Aline Mura-Brunel, and Marc Dambre, editors. *Le roman français au tournant du XXIe siècle*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2004.

Bollas, Christopher. *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. New York: Columbia UP, 1987.

Crownshaw, Richard. *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Dambre, Marc, with Christopher D. Lloyd and Richard J. Golsan. *Mémoires occupées: fictions françaises et Seconde Guerre mondiale*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2013.

Davis, Colin. "Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms." *French Studies*. 59. 3 (2005): 373–79.

———. *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Desarthe, Agnès. *Le Remplaçant*. Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 2009.

Grenaudier Klijn, F. M. "Postmemorial ghosts and shadows in Agnès Desarthe's *Un Secret sans importance.*" *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, 28: 2 (2007): 49–62.

Grimbert, Philippe. *Un secret*. Paris: Grasset, 2004; Livre de poche, 2006.

Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, 29: 1 (2008): 103–28.

Hirsch, Marianne, and Leo Spitzer. *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz.* Berkeley, Calif.: U of California P, 2010.

Hutton, Margaret Anne. "Textures and Spectres in Sylvie Germain's *Magnus*." In *Redefining the Real: The Fantastic in Contemporary French and Francophone Women's Writing*, edited by M. A. Hutton. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009: 187–206.

Jordan, Shirley. *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2005.

Korczak, Janusz. *Ghetto Diary*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2003. First published 1978.

———. *The Child's Right to Respect* (1929). Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2009.

———. *Loving Every Child: Wisdom for Parents*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2007.

Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of* Mass Culture. Columbia: Columbia UP, 2004.

Laub, Dori, and Shoshana Felman. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Martin, Tim. Interview with Agnès Desarthe, "A Page in the Life: Agnès Desarthe.". *The Telegraph*, 31 January 2012. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9042134/A-Page-in-the-Life-Agnes-Desarthe.html [accessed 1 August 2017].

Modiano, Patrick. *Livret de famille.* Paris: Gallimard, 1977.

Sanyal, Debarati. *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance*. New York: Fordham UP, 2015.

Schwab, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.

Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *The family Moskat*. New York: Knopf, 1950.

———. *The certificate*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

Silverman, Max. *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film.* New York: Berghan, 2013.

Viart, Dominique, and Bruno Vercier. *La littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations*. Paris: Bordas, 2005.

Winnicott, D. W. *Home is Where We Start from: Essays by a Psychoanalyst.* New York: Penguin, 1990.

———. *Playing and Reality*. London and New York: Routledge, 1971.